

NOTES ON THE AUTHOR

Eric Arthur Blair (George Orwell) was born in Bengal, Northern India in 1903, the only son of an English civil servant whose duty it was to oversee the opium crop, an immensely profitable export commodity for the British Raj. The destination of most of the opium was China. The Chinese were forced to exchange their precious reserve of silver for the drug and although Orwell did not say so, it is possible that Boxer, the carthorse in *Animal Farm* is named after the Boxer Rebellion (1900) in which young Chinese students had unsuccessfully revolted against European imperialism. All his life, Orwell was torn between love for his country and a passionate rejection of the injustices and hypocrisy of British imperialism.

After leaving school, he was to spend five years in Burma as a colonial policeman, an experience which strengthened his sympathy for the underdogs of Empire. His book *Burmese Days* (1934) draws upon this experience.

Young Eric Blair was an avid reader. One of his favourite books was Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, which he was given for his eighth birthday. About the time he was writing *Animal Farm*, he wrote, "*Gulliver's Travels*' fascination seems inexhaustible ... a year has never passed without my re-reading at least part of it." Swift's influence on *Animal Farm* is undeniable (See **Orwell and the Critics**).

As a member of the English upper middle class, Orwell went to a (private) preparatory school. There he worked hard to obtain a scholarship to Eton where he rubbed shoulders with the most privileged boys in the land. Although he loathed his prep school, he enjoyed his time at Eton where he was free to read as he pleased. (Read about it in *Such, Such were the Joys*, – an essay written in 1947, to be found in the *Collected Works* – to see how the young Orwell reacted to the snobberies and brutalities of the English class system.) He did not, however, work hard enough at Eton to win a scholarship to Oxford and, as his parents were not prepared to pay for him to go to university, he followed his father into the colonial service.

When he returned from Burma on sick leave in 1927, he resigned from the colonial police force because he felt that he had been defending the strong against the weak. For the rest of his life, he was to fight on the other side. He fought for the weak by finding out about their lives and writing about them.

He became a tramp and wrote about it in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). He lived among the miners in the industrial north of England and exposed their plight in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). Most famously, he went off to the Spanish Civil War to defend the democratically elected government against Franco's fascists. His *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) tells the story of his experiences in Spain and his bitter disillusionment with the left-wing cause which he had espoused (See **Historical and Cultural Context**).

Political disillusion was to inspire his best-known works, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). He also wrote political, social and literary columns for the *Tribune* and the *Observer*. His *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters* were published in four volumes after his death (1960). Until recently, this was the most comprehensive edition of Orwell's non-fictional writing. However, in 1998, *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, edited by Peter Davidson was published in London by Secker and Warburg. (in 20 volumes.)

Orwell's health had never been good and he did not take care of himself. He died in 1950 in London.